

Moral Decision Making

by Reverend Frank McNulty

Sometimes we can gain moral insight from a television program. Recently I watched a program in which a pastor is consulted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation by a young woman who finds herself pregnant and considering an abortion. The priest tells her to “follow your conscience,” and little more. Later, she consults another priest who explains the Church’s position on abortion, but offers no further advice.

Both priests’ approaches are extreme. The first might be called “interiorizing.” The latter could be called “exteriorizing.” The first priest threw the ball completely into the young woman’s court; the second priest carried the ball for her. One priest forgot that her complete value system had a role to play; the other forgot that an essential part of that value system is a freedom of conscience. But what does that freedom entail?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human

person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act.” (CCC, 1778) It can be something like a Geiger counter making appropriate noises when you approach a sinful choice. But if you only interiorize and make an isolated decision, you may ignore history, the gospel, or the Church. You may ignore the rights of others.

The opposite extreme has its own set of dangers. You might ignore your conscience and turn the choice over solely to someone else—a confessor, a pastor, a theologian, or a church teaching. However, we must not evade our personal responsibility by leaving it entirely to others to make our moral judgments.

The determination of what is right and what is wrong is accomplished by a person, and there is much more to a person than intellect or this particular moment of existence. We all see life through our own filters. These filters come from our emotions, attitudes, prejudices, and personal histories. They come from

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our environment, culture, families, and peer groups. To simply listen to our interior Geiger counter would be so simple. To simply do what someone else tells us to do might be equally simple. But neither would represent a sufficiently conscientious decision.

What is the middle path? The Church teaches us that we must always obey the "certain judgment" of our conscience. (CCC, 1790) Yet we have an obligation to see that we have informed our conscience to the best of our ability and to follow our best judgment. We must thoughtfully ponder the relevant circumstances and all the values involved. Yet we will need outside help in complicated situations. Prayer will be an essential help in discerning what is pleasing to

God. The values of human dignity and the common good must be considered. The Word of God, especially the life and message of Jesus, should be our guide. The collective wisdom of our Church and its moral tradition are available to assist us and should be carefully heard.

So we never need to stand alone in our decision making. We can face even thorny and complex situations with confidence. We are endowed with an intellectual capability of deciding, and we have at our disposal the resources to make our decision an informed one. Having done our best, we can be at peace knowing that we have done all that God requires.

*We should
do our best
to inform our conscience
and then
to follow it.*

For Reflection

- What sources have you drawn upon in the past when you were called upon to make a serious moral decision?
- How have these sources assisted you in making an informed decision of conscience?